A Turbulent Territory

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The landscape of Gilgit-Baltistan (G-B) has held the minds with peace and transformed the harshest environmental realities into a canvas of serenity and calmness. Heaven is in existence on earth, but unexplored by sight and untouched with the recognition. This is the truest explanation of what the best of Nature has to offer to the earth. The region that is blessed with such diversities has been unambiguous about their association with Pakistan. It is argued that their inhabitant's legitimate demands have not been intentionally acknowledged yet. As a result, their integration in Pakistan appears to be a far cry. In continuing with their lingering hopes, the people of the region continue to accept the political policies presented to them, considering themselves as the identified citizens of Pakistan. But their reality is thwarted. A history of events has unfolded which speaks volumes about their battles against Dogras, massive trials and tribulations in accession to Pakistan and cascading of pessimism on their being treated as an adjunct of the Frontier province. Enforced government in the name of the Kashmir cause has burdened further chaos on them.

Interestingly, Article 1 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, does not even mention the mere existence of the region in the boundaries of Pakistan, regardless of Muslim majority and a glorious past. The Supreme Court in 1999 (SCMR 1379) circumvented this in order to give G-B a legitimate status but declined to recognize it as a statutory part of Pakistan. Notwithstanding, the work of the Federation, G-B has no voice to be opinionated nor has the status of any legal working under the democratic governance. As per Article 61 of the G-B (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order, 2009, stated in 2010 (GBLR 160) that G-B was a part of Pakistan. Another Article 1(2) (d) of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, stated, that Pakistan shall comprise of 'such states and territories as they are or may be included, whether by accession or otherwise'.

The Supreme Court with all its laws has assuaged the real standing of the G-B under the concept of Confederacy. It has utilized all its supreme constitutional powers to assist the region. But recent efforts of the G-B (Empowerment and Self Governance) Order, 2009, to bring it under the framework of 1973 Constitution needs to witness the acceptance of their identity as a part of Pakistan or else the ever-lengthy 68 years of abstract scrutiny would continue to stagger.

With all the political hindrances, so far, G-B has been unable to acquire seats in the National Assembly or in the Senate. It has no representation in the Federal government, whereas every other part of Pakistan has been provided with equal opportunity to exemplify its ideology and political aims. Similarly, no share is provided to G-B in the Indus River System Authority. Ideally, the Council of G-B has to be chaired by the Prime Minister and not by any local official. Replete with resources, still no profit is shared or equally distributed which is generated from hydroelectric power stations in G-B, as provided for the Constitution.

Comparing FATA with G-B, the former has a political say at the National Assembly and Senate. They hold proper positions for their representatives to enunciate their internal and external issues and make millions when their vote is required on crucial issues. As compared to the population size of all the representative parts, FATA gets the optimum promulgation at the Federal level. The government should stop marginalizing G-B as a shadowed corridor. For the government, it is a disputed territory with no legalized ethnic and religious connections. However, this self-constructed image has struck an ignorant chord with this region.

Due to G-B's strategic location, it has become a hardest nut to crack for all the political parties. Lately, it has been observed that almost every single political party of Pakistan is firmly committed to systemically settle the issue of this disputed territory. This is the most sensitive region with soil-bred patriotic soldiers who have been fighting against the tempests of life at the Alps of mountains, where the milieu of Indian antagonism is ever present as the sword of Damocles. Col. Sher Khan, for example, led the charge with his company, which halted the devious Indians, surreptitious and illegal (against the Karachi Agreement of 1949) advance along the Siachin glacier.

The importance of this region which holds enough economic proficiency, due to its richness of resources, must not be ignored in the completion of the most touted Pak-China Economic Corridor. All the mega-hydro projects and developmental programs are located on this route. However, Pakistan's People Party (PPP) helped to install the local government body for the regulation of domestic affairs under the Legal Framework. Moreover, the 2009 Empowerment Order did make a difference in providing G-B an identity-based status.

This step was not accepted at large, but still, strengthened a bit, the conventional G-B's perspective. The standing of G-B can achieve firm foundation by getting recognition in the National Assembly and Senate. This means integration in Pakistan under the Law and Constitution. All parties should work collaboratively

in order to grant a charter to Gilgit-Baltistan. Regular elections would strengthen the prospects of the region as an accessed part of Pakistan and bring joy to the people, as delayed recognition of their wishes and their natural and human rights.

The constitutional lines read as “whether by accession or otherwise”, Geographical confinements are not definite and can be increased further. Hence, the political autonomy of the region is swayed by the hands of the Federal government, and the corrupt, venal and incompetent Kashmiri political leaders, who have recently threatened to cast a fatal blow if G-B is considered the fifth province of Pakistan. This oscillation of power is yet to be balanced before the status of G-B is settled.